

The Last Lecture¹

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When I was asked to give this talk, my life flashed before my eyes. *The Last Lecture* sounded so ominous. I thought that maybe I looked even worse than I felt. But then I realized that the request was that I sum up all the important things that I had learned in life and pass them on to you.

Apparently, I had been officially enrolled in the ranks of the *wise*.

How did that happen? I asked myself. When was my first wise thought? When was my first enlightened thought?

After some sifting through ancient memories, I settled on a warm summer day in a pasture somewhere west of St. Louis, Missouri. I was 16 and my parents had told me that it was time to start thinking about what I wanted as a career. What should I study in college? Should I go to college at all? What came to mind was the priesthood. Probably every young Catholic kid entertained the notion at least once, even if only briefly. After reflection, I decided that the job of a priest is first and foremost to set a good example for others. I could do that without donning the robes, and so I moved on.

The wisdom in that decision was that I didn't have to be one thing and nothing else. I could be a priest or I could live a good life, setting the best example that I could, and I could still be ... something else. It was the something else that led to my second wise choice. I still needed to tell my parents my decision about a career. A lot of my friends were interested in being a doctor or a lawyer. My sister said I would make a good lawyer because, according to her, I like to argue. It was tough, until I asked myself what a doctor or lawyer actually does on a day-to-day basis. I figured that this was a question that needed to be answered. I didn't want to rely on the stereotype.

What they do, I told myself, is sit in an office and wait for people to come in and complain. Well, I didn't want that, so those two were scratched. But what? What?

The answer was that I didn't know, and more importantly, there was no reason that I should be expected to know. I was 16. I didn't know anything....or did I? I knew I didn't know what these professionals did. I didn't know what anyone did except my dad. I did know that I was curious, smartish, and that I wanted something creative and hands-on. I didn't want a desk and a necktie.

How could I find out? Go to college. I should go to college and decide later. The exposure would be good for me. So, I chose a major designed to get me accepted and then I switched four times as my exploration showed me what suited me best. But my first lesson was not lost. When I left the Engineering department, I didn't leave the tinkering, now rudimentary engineering, behind. It became a

¹ In 2016 I was asked to participate in a seminar for students at a local college during which I was to present my "Last Lecture" or parting words, if you will. The seminar never took place, but as I had already prepared the lecture, I thought I would share it.

tool. In the same manner, photography, SCUBA diving, sailing and nautical skills, writing, all became tools that I would use in my profession: Zoology.

In 1968, when I chose it, there weren't any jobs in the field of Zoology. But some of my dad's wisdom became useful. He had said that if I did what I loved, I would be better at it than the people who did it because it was a job. I wouldn't actually have a job. I'd have a well paid hobby. I realized that I took a lot of wisdom from my dad and from my grandparents. In fact, I had acquired - or attempted to acquire - the attributes of several people whom I respected. I didn't want to be just like dad, but I did want to develop his patience. From one grandfather I took practicality, from another I took perseverance. I wasn't really happy with myself in those early years but I realized I was not stuck with that person my whole life. I could shrug off bad habits and traits and acquire new ones.

Somewhere along the line, I must have picked self-reliance because at 18 I left home, paid for college on my own, learned what I needed to learn and graduated with the degree of my choice.

After I joined and served in the Navy, while others were running off to Canada I might add, I returned to graduate school. I was in the service for only 6 years and most people said I should stay in and make a career, but I wanted to learn.

How will you pay for it? How will you support a wife and two kids?

More wisdom here. I learned that if I thought of myself as a father, husband, and breadwinner as well as part time student my mind set was different than if I thought of myself as a student who also had to support a family. The change in priority made all the difference. My wife and kids didn't see the difference, but I did.

Somewhere along the line I learned not to be in a hurry. I realized that my time in college and graduate school was the only time in my life when so many people would be totally committed to me obtaining an education. I went an extra year just to get the most of it.

Somewhere along the line I learned that I could achieve whatever I wanted to achieve if I just worked at it. If I took responsibility - it was mine.

Somewhere along the line I learned that I didn't need the approval of others as much as I needed my own approval.

Somewhere along the line I learned that I enjoyed living life rather than living a life designed to prepare myself for retirement.

And somewhere, I learned that we are our own biggest impediment to success.

So, after considering a career as a photographer, a SCUBA instructor, a naval officer, and a bartender, I ended up with a doctorate in successional ecology - and still didn't have a job. How could I be successful if I didn't have a job?

But what makes success? How do we learn to achieve it? In an exchange just the other day when a bunch of old people were telling a bunch of young people that back in 1955 we rode bicycles without

helmets, I realized one truth; If you tell a kid all throughout his childhood that he or she can't do this and can't do that, then when they grow up, they can't do anything. But I was one of the kids who didn't have a helmet. Could I find success?

Let's go back to the first little piece of wisdom - that part where I flirted with the priesthood. One of the reasons that I chose a different path was that after learning a full mass in Latin, studying numerous different religions in school, and memorizing untold numbers of prayers, I found that I only needed one and saying it in English was just fine. It is short it is to the point. It is not about asking for fame, wealth, riches, but it is about a request.

It goes: *Lord, give me the courage to change the things I can, the serenity to accept those I cannot, and the wisdom to know the difference.* Three wishes. Three requests. Coupled with an old saying - You can't take it with you - I decided to redefine success. If all you can take with you is your character, your personality, your spiritual content, then would not success be better defined in those terms? Would not success be better defined in who we are?

After I retired, I put this thought into a novel. It's a paltry novel, of little worth, but in it, the male lead captures this thought when he tells the female lead why he hasn't sought success in money and power. He says. "Success is building the person that you are happy to die as."

Whatever you do. Whatever your choices. Make sure that you can carry them into the next world.